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Greece and Byzantium

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The Twelfth Stephen J. Brademas, Sr., Lecture

Greece and Byzantium

D.M. Nicol



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GREECE AND BYZANTIUM

Greece today stands at the end of two powerful traditions; the Hellenic and the Byzantine; the ancient and the medieval. The two traditions have something in common. Both were evolved and conveyed in the Greek language. But the Byzantine tradition was Christian, the Hellenic was pagan; and the Byzantines were always a little suspicious of the legacy of ancient Greek literature and philosophy. To them a Hellene meant an unredeemed pagan. Definitions of periods of history are bound to be relative. The end of the Middle Ages in Europe is sometimes arbitrarily set in the fifteenth century, about the time of the discovery of America. But in Greece the Middle Ages, or the medieval period of the country's history, lasted well into the eighteenth century. The Byzantine Empire as a political institution had a beginning, a middle and an end. It began in AD 330 when Constantine founded his New Rome on the site of the ancient Byzantium; and it ended on Tuesday 29 May 1453, when the Ottoman Turks conquered the city of Constantine. But its ideas and its spirit lived on among the Greek-speaking people for centuries after that date; and their influence is still far from spent.

The soil of Greece today is littered with the ruins of classical antiquity. The most impressive of them are temples, for temples were built to last. Greece is also littered with the monuments of its Byzantine or medieval past. And here again, most of them are temples, or rather Christian churches. The many Byzantine churches and monasteries of Greece do not look as if they were built to last. Their masonry and brickwork sometimes appear slipshod and clumsy compared with the finesse of the ancient temples. But they have lasted because they have been in constant use ever since they were built. The monastery church of the Great Lavra on Mount Athos was built in 963, and though its dome has now and then collapsed, it has been in daily and nightly service as a Christian temple for 1020 years. It was built in the middle age of Byzantium. It

continues to exist and to serve its divine purpose in the modern age of Greece. The legacy of ancient Greece to the whole world is so overwhelming that one can scarcely quantify it. The legacy of Byzantium was not so widely spread. But it has influenced all the European countries which once formed part of the Byzantine Empire and most of all Greece itself.

Its most obvious manifestation is the Orthodox Church. This is not surprising. In 1453 the Sultan Mehmed II who had conquered Constantinople needed a representative of the millions of Orthodox Christians within his empire. He picked the monk Gennadios. It was the Sultan who invested Gennadios as patriarch, handing him his insignia, his robes, his staff and his pectoral cross, as the first Patriarch of Constantinople under the Muslim dispensation. Gennadios was given the task of working out a lasting concordat between triumphant Muslims and humiliated Christians. He was the *Ethnarch*, the leader of the Christian *millet* or nation within the Ottoman Empire. He and his successors were to be personally answerable to the Sultan for the conduct of that *millet*. It was a heavy responsibility. The Byzantine Church in all its long history had never been burdened with so large a measure of secular authority.¹

Byzantine political theorists had generally held that church and empire, patriarch and emperor, went together. A church without an empire was an impossibility. The one could not exist without the other. In 1453 they were proved wrong. The empire as a political institution was dead. But the church lived on as the embodiment of the Byzantine spirit and tradition. It is often said that the Orthodox Church kept the torch of Hellenism alive during the dark centuries of the Turkish occupation of Greece. This is a persistent myth. What the Church really kept alive was the Byzantine Christian tradition. Constantine Sathas, a great scholar and a great patriot of modern Greece, once described the Patriarch Gennadios as "the last Byzantine and the first Hellene".² Gennadios would have liked the tribute. "I do not call myself a Hellene," he said,

because I do not believe as the Hellenes believed. I might call myself a Byzantine because I was born at Byzantium. But I prefer simply to call myself a Christian."³

The surviving Byzantine Church quickly came round to the idea that the empire still existed, albeit in another form. Christians still lived under a theocracy. The emperor was now unfortunately a Muslim. But he was still the *Basileus*, the Sultan-Basileus, ordained by God to rule the world from Constantinople. Kritoboulos of Imbros, one of the historians of the fall of the city, dedicated his work to "the Supreme Autokrator, Emperor of Emperors, Mehmed... by the will of God invincible Lord of land and sea."⁴ The Church nonetheless encouraged the hope of a miracle. Prophecies abounded, foretelling that the Christian Empire would be restored, however briefly, before the Second Coming of Christ and the end of the world. The priest who had been celebrating the Liturgy in Hagia Sophia on that fateful Tuesday had disappeared behind the wall of the sanctuary when the Turks broke into the cathedral. He would yet return to finish his interrupted sacrament.⁵ There was a legendary king who had been turned to marble and lay asleep in a hidden cave near the Golden Gate of Constantinople. At any moment he would awake and expel the infidel from the city. His name was sometimes John and sometimes Constantine. But in either case, his waking would be heralded by the bellowing of an ox. All these hopes and fears were to be found in a huge corpus of messianic and prophetic literature, including the so-called Oracles of Leo the Wise. They were eventually assembled in a prophetic book ascribed to one Agathangelos, who was said to have lived in Sicily in the thirteenth century. In fact, the compilation was made by a Greek archimandrite from Adrianople in the eighteenth century. It was immensely popular and had a wide circulation in manuscript and printed editions.⁶

For at least two centuries after the fall of Constantinople this was the kind of literature that shaped the minds and

the hopes of the Greeks. The church and the Christian faith were for long their only links with the past and their only certainty for the future, whether in this world or the next. There is no evidence that the Greeks of these centuries felt any affinity with the Hellenes of antiquity or read any of their works. The Byzantine church had, in any case, always taught that true wisdom could only come through grace and revelation; and what, said one of its saints in the fourteenth century, of these things could Euclid, Ptolemy, Socrates or Aristotle have known? "To know God in truth is immeasurably greater than all the philosophy of the Hellenes."⁷ The church was also suspicious of the new technology. It had to keep a watchful eye on what the Greek printing presses of Europe were publishing. The first such press in Constantinople was set up in 1627. The machinery was imported from London by that eccentric and enterprising Patriarch, Cyril Loukaris, sometimes called the "Protestant Patriarch." It seems never to have printed anything, for it was destroyed by a combined effort of the Janissaries and the Jesuits. The Turks thought it was a secret weapon. The Jesuits were jealous, because they had their own Greek press in Rome for churning out anti-Orthodox propaganda.⁸

Greek books were, of course, printed elsewhere in the Orthodox world in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, notably in Roumania, in the principalities of Moldavia and Wallachia, and by the Greek community in Venice. But it was the church that called the tune and paid the piper, or rather the printer, for what it considered to be fit reading matter for the Greek Christian public, whether within the Ottoman Empire or in the diaspora. The great majority of books printed were of a religious nature—liturgical texts, psalters, gospels and the like. This was so until the middle of the eighteenth century, when some Greek presses began to print translations of the authors of the new enlightenment in the West. The church was quick to censure this tendency. But even in the eighteenth century, when some new ideas were beginning to

filter through the ecclesiastical net to the Greek-reading public, religious works still held the field. Out of 1521 books printed between 1700 and 1800, 956 (or about 60%) were religious in content. The other 40% did not, as one might have hoped, include the works of Homer, Plato, or Aristotle. The secular literature most in demand was clearly not that written in classical Greek, unless one includes Aesop's fables, which ran through twenty printed editions between 1775 and 1821. The *Erotokritos*, for example, was reprinted seven times in the eighteenth century, and the "Romance of Alexander the Great" six times.⁹

It was towards the end of the eighteenth century that things began to change. Greek schools were founded at Ioannina, Chios, Smyrna and other cities, where a feeling for the glorious past of ancient Greece was deliberately imparted. They were endowed by wealthy Greek business men, such as the Zosimades brothers of Ioannina, who had made their fortunes in the West and knew what the western world expected of the Greeks. It expected them to be Hellenes, the proud descendants of Pericles and Themistocles, not pitiable Byzantine Christians. Paintings of the "Hellenic philosophers," Plato, Solon, Aristotle, Plutarch and Thucydides, had already appeared on the walls of churches in the sixteenth century. In the late eighteenth century they begin to appear no longer labelled as Hellenes and adorned with haloes, as Saint Ploutarchos and Saint Thucydides.¹⁰ But for the most part, people still felt more at home with the familiar forms and faces of their Christian saints than they did with these exotic creatures from their allegedly Hellenic past.

By then the Greek War of Independence was drawing near. Theodore Kolokotronis, one of the heroes of that war, liked to wear what he thought was a Homeric helmet. That was about the extent of his classical education. He admitted that his childhood reading had been entirely religious—the prophecies of Agathangelos, the psalter, the *oktoechos* and the lives of saints.¹¹ Rigas Pheraios, who in 1796 drew up a

Constitution for the as yet to be constituted "Hellenic Republic," had already persuaded a publisher in Vienna to print an edition of the prophecies of Agathangelos.¹² Rigas Pheraios, or Velestinlis, was one of the first to break out of the Byzantine mould, but only to a limited extent. The Constitution of his proposed Hellenic Republic, like the map that went with it, was designed to cover the inhabitants of Rumeli (or Turkey in Europe), Asia Minor, the Archipelago and the Danubian principalities of Moldavia and Wallachia. All these people were said to be descended from the ancient Hellenes. The official language of this Republic was to be Greek; its citizens were to be known as Hellenes, not Romaioi. The revolutionary flag was to show the club of Hercules surmounted by three crosses. It is significant that the church was left out of account. But in other respects what Rigas envisaged was a restored Byzantine Empire, with Constantinople as its capital.¹³

The most celebrated Neohellenist of this age was Adamantios Koraes. Koraes hated Byzantium and the Byzantine spirit and tradition, which he saw as a dead weight on the otherwise pure and free Greek spirit. His mission in life was to recall the Greeks to the great heritage of their ancient past. His most important work in this respect was his *Hellenic Library* (*Hellenike Bibliotheke*). This was a series of classical texts supplied with edifying introductions about the cultural, educational and linguistic problems of contemporary Greece.¹⁴ Koraes was a great man and a great scholar. But for most of his life he lived in western Europe. He was the son of a silk merchant in Smyrna and tried to go into business himself in Amsterdam before settling in Paris. He was an absentee patriot, seventy-three years old when the war of independence broke out in Greece; and he was deeply influenced by the enlightenment and the political ideas of the French Revolution. These were the ideas that fed the flames of the Greek desire for liberation, and for a national identity as Hellenes. For Koraes, as Arnold Toynbee

puts it, "Modern Western Enlightenment" and "Classical Greek Hellenism" were interchangeable terms.¹⁵

Enlightened western Europeans of the early nineteenth century, captivated and brainwashed by Edward Gibbon's account of Byzantium, were inclined to blame the Greeks for their own degeneration under the Ottoman Empire. They should never have allowed themselves to sink into the superstition and decadence of that monk-ridden society. As Koraes would have agreed, it was the Byzantine period of their history that had promoted the corruption of the Greeks, which had merely been consummated by the Turks. What, as one German scholar put it, was the point of studying a depraved form of the Greek language in which the preposition *apo* takes the accusative instead of the genitive case.¹⁶ Such were thought to be the symptoms of the Byzantine corruption of the soul and spirit of ancient Greece.

It would be unkind to say that the Orthodox Church had a vested interest in maintaining that state of corruption. But certainly the church was alarmed by the wind of change blowing from the West in the eighteenth century. Its leaders condemned the baleful influence of the new enlightenment and French revolutionary thinking on the minds and political aspirations of their flocks. In 1768 at Leipzig, Eugenios Voulgaris published the first Greek translation of one of the works of Voltaire. Translations of Locke, Descartes, Newton, Rousseau and others followed.¹⁷ A Greek enlightenment seemed in danger of breaking out. The liberal principles of western European thought found eager audiences in all the cities where there were Greek communities—in Paris, Vienna, Budapest, Venice, Rome, Bucharest, Jassy, Odessa, Moscow, St. Petersburg, and in Constantinople itself. The church and its aristocratic patrons reacted swiftly to this dangerous development.

By 1790, the patriarchate had its own printing press in Constantinople. Patriarchs, bishops, monks and laymen poured out pamphlets which were widely distributed denoun-

cing, often in the most violent terms, the philosophers and scientists of the West. Voulgaris, translator of Voltaire, had by then been invited to the court of Catherine the Great in St. Petersburg. He changed his tune and became a bishop. In 1791 he published a tract called "In Refutation of a certain impious Prattler." Two years later the Prattler, Voltaire, was officially condemned by the Patriarch of Constantinople—and along with him Rousseau and Spinoza. One of the pamphlets produced that same year is entitled: "The Wretchedness of the Pseudo-Sages, or an Apology on behalf of the Christian Faith towards the Refutation of Certain philosophical Babblings." Another is called: "A Reply to the Irrational Zeal of the Philosophers coming from Europe."¹⁸

"The teachings of these new libertarians," as one of the patriarchs wrote, "are hostile to the Holy Scriptures and to the Apostolic teaching...and should be hated as a device of the fiendish Devil, ever alert for the spiritual destruction of Christians." In the 1790s the Patriarch of Constantinople issued a series of encyclicals warning the faithful against "the wily snares of unrest and rebellion" being propagated by the French.¹⁹ In 1798 a document was published in the name of the Patriarch of Jerusalem called the *Paternal Exhortation* (*Didaskalia Patrike*). It restated in unambiguous terms the old Byzantine theory of the divine order of things. The Ottoman Empire was the guardian of that order. It had been set up by God. The Sultan ruled by God's grace. The current western notions of political liberty were inspired by Satan.

Our Lord raised out of nothing this mighty Empire of the Ottomans, in the place of our Roman Empire which had begun, in some ways, to deviate from the beliefs of the Orthodox faith; and He exalted the Ottoman Empire higher than any other kingdom so as to show without doubt that it came into being by divine will and not by the power of man, and to assure all the faithful that in this way he deigned to effect a great mystery, namely the salvation of His chosen people.²⁰

The Church also mistrusted the revived interest in the ancient Greek heritage and in the natural sciences in Greek schools and colleges. Both represented "Hellenism" in the worst and pagan sense. By all means let young men study the writings of selected classical authors for style and grammar; but they must beware of their content. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the models for style in writing Greek were still those that had been favored in the middle and late Byzantine era. Voulgaris translated his Voltaire into ancient Greek, not into the spoken language of his time. Alexander Mavrokordatos, who held the distinguished and lucrative post of Grand Interpreter to the Sublime Porte for close to forty years, wrote all his published works in the ancient language. Even his letters are in the highly rhetorical style of Byzantine epistolography; and indeed they were used in Greek schools as exemplars of the genre, along with the letters of Libanios and Synesios. Byzantium still ruled the rhetorical waves.

The Greek language was, of course, also a part of the Byzantine heritage, whether in its pure *katharevousa* form or in the demotic, vulgar version. The co-existence of "learned" and "popular" forms of Greek was, indeed, older than Constantinople. If it was true, as Koraes maintained, that "the character of a whole nation may be known from its language," then it was important to reach some agreement about the form of that language, for fear that you might end up with two nations instead of one. Koraes himself favored what might be called an evolutionary purifying of the spoken tongue.²¹ Others of his day were for developing the demotic to the exclusion of the literary form. Still others were "Atticisers" pure and not so simple, who would have everyone talking and writing a dead language. Enthusiasm for the new Hellenism took some strange forms. In 1817, at the Greek college at Ayvalik (Kydonies) on the coast of Asia Minor, the excited students passed a resolution to converse only in the language of Demosthenes and Plato. "The gross and vulgar language," they

language," they resolved, "is wholly unbecoming to us as the descendants of the ancient Hellenes. Each of us therefore, is to speak, so far as possible, in the Hellenic language. Whoever does not do so is, as a punishment, to recite a page of Homer before us."²²

The students also resolved to change their names. They could no longer put up with Christian names such as Iannis, Georgios and so on. They would adopt names worthy of their ancestry, like Xenophon, Aristides, or Themistocles. This practice, too, was quickly condemned by the church. In 1819 the Patriarch Gregory V fulminated against what he called "the innovation of giving ancient Greek names to the baptized infants of the faithful." The Patriarch also warned the faithful against the perils of the natural sciences, which could lead only to ungodliness and atheism. He was all for education, but it should be confined to grammar, rhetoric and true religion. "For what use is it," he asked "to the young to learn numbers and algebra, and cubes and cube roots, and triangles and triangulated tetragons... and elliptical projections, and atoms and vacuums... if, as a consequence, in speech they are barbarians, ungrammatical in their writings, ignorant of their religion, degenerate in their morals...and unworthy of their ancestral calling?"²³ The students at Ayvalik and the Patriarch Gregory were in agreement that young people should make themselves worthy of their ancestors. But they were thinking of different sets of ancestors.

Alexander Mavrokordatos was one of the Phanariote Greeks of Constantinople, those privileged and wealthy aristocrats who served the Sultan in various ways, especially as the princes of Moldavia and Wallachia in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Their special relationship with the Turks did not make them traitors to Christianity. Their fortunes helped the church to survive; and the world in which they made their fortunes was the world of Orthodox Christianity. It extended from Moscow in the north to Alexandria in the south. It was in fact the Byzantine world. For business

purposes at least Greek was still the *lingua franca* of that world, just as Orthodoxy was the common form of Christianity. Its center was still Constantinople. The Phanariotes were not much interested in the idea of setting up a Hellenic Republic. Their dream of liberation from the Turks involved nothing less than the recreation of the Byzantine Empire. They looked to Moscow and to Bucharest for the fulfillment of that dream, not to Greece or to the West. Moscow, the Third Rome, seat of an Orthodox Patriarch and an Orthodox Tsar, was the white hope for the liberation of the Byzantine people. The liberation of Greece could wait until the double-headed eagle flew again in Constantinople.²⁴

Catherine the Great of Russia was rather taken with this idea. Her friend Voltaire encouraged her to imagine a new Russian Empire with Constantinople, not Moscow, as its capital. This is surely not what the Greeks had in mind. But Catherine was interested in the Greek cause as well; and she toyed with the idea of a Greek Empire too—or rather an Orthodox Empire, which would comprise the Slav as well as the Greek Christian populations of European Turkey. It would be centered on Constantinople, and its first Emperor would be her own grandson Constantine. There were some who could already hear the bellowing of the ox and the stirring of the sleeping giant at the Golden Gate of the City. Once again Orthodoxy, not Hellenism, was to be the test of nationality. But it was all fantasy. The Greeks were quickly and sadly disillusioned by Catherine's only direct intervention in their affairs. During the course of the Russo-Turkish War that she instigated in 1768, a small Russian force landed at Navarino to help rouse the Greeks of the Peloponnese to rebellion. It was massacred in 1770, and the Turkish reprisals were terrible. More and more the Greeks looked to the West for their salvation.²⁵

The Orthodox Church would probably have approved of the re-establishment of an Orthodox Empire centered on Constantinople, if it had ever come about. But when the real

Greek War of Independence finally began, the church at once registered its disapproval. In March 1821 an encyclical was posted in all the Greek churches in Constantinople. It was signed by the Patriarch Gregory, the Patriarch of Jerusalem and twenty-one other Orthodox bishops. It excommunicated all those responsible for taking up arms in revolution against the protector of Christians and the lawful sovereign of the Ottoman Empire, the Sultan. "For there is no power but of God; the powers that be are ordained of God, and he who objects to this Empire...rebels against God's order."²⁶ This was pure Byzantine political thought, unchanged and unadulterated. It did not save the Patriarch Gregory. The Turks laid the responsibility for the rebellion at his door, as head of the Christian *millet*; and they hanged him at the gate of his palace in the Phanar. Fourteen of his bishops suffered the same fate.²⁷

The Greek rebellion, or war of liberation, did in the end result in the establishment of a monarchy in Greece, western style. It was not the Byzantine Empire of the Romans revived; it was the Kingdom of the Hellenes. The protection of the Orthodox faith was enshrined in the first article of its Constitution. Nonetheless, it was a Hellenic and not a Byzantine kingdom. This was what the western powers had wanted and expected; and for a time, largely due to western influence, Hellenism duly prevailed in Greece. King Otto was a Bavarian, no more Orthodox by birth than Catherine the Great had been. His German architects went to work to make a mini-Munich out of Athens. Only at the last moment were they dissuaded from turning the Parthenon into a royal palace. His Greek subjects enthusiastically recreated all the administrative apparatus of ancient Athens—an Areopagos, a Boule, an Academy, nomarchs, demarchs and the rest. Slav or Turkish place names were altered to their supposed ancient forms to make the new Hellenes feel more at home. The advice of Koraes was followed with regard to the Greek language. It was purged of its impurities so drastically

that almost no one could write it any more, let alone speak it. Even the Church of Greece became a national, Hellenic institution, autocephalous and independent of the jurisdiction of the Patriarch of Constantinople. And then came Constantine Paparregopoulos with his monumental *History of the Greek Nation*, first published in five volumes between the years 1860 and 1872. His purpose was to point the moral that after all, Hellenism and Byzantinism, the ancient and the medieval traditions of the Greek people, were one and the same in spirit. There was a historical continuum between Homer and King Otto of Bavaria. The Byzantines, or rather the Byzantine Greeks, had been Hellenes at heart, though sometimes regrettably led astray by oriental influences. The marriage of Hellenism and Christianity had at length been celebrated in the Christian Kingdom of the Hellenes.

Generations of modern Greeks have been brought up on the great *History* of Paparregopoulos. It has inspired them with a sense of the unity and continuity of their race; and it is perhaps presumptuous for foreigners to question the validity of a national myth so ably and often poetically expressed. But it is a fact that the roots of the new Hellas of the nineteenth century were still firmly planted in the Byzantine Orthodox tradition. Hellenism was something strange and foreign. People who lived in Vodena, Karavassara or Velestino were puzzled when they were told to rename their towns with the ancient names of Edessa, Amphilochia and Pherai. The heroes of Homer, of Athens, of Sparta and of Thebes were no doubt splendid warriors. But the Christian soldier-saints of Byzantium painted on the walls of the local church were nearer, more familiar and more comforting. One only had to enter an Orthodox church to be wafted back into the half-remembered glory of the Byzantine Empire. The paintings and icons recalled that strange but familiar blend of Byzantine imperial and celestial mystery, from the all-seeing eyes of the Christ Pantokrator in the dome, to the Virgin in the apse, to the figures of Constantine the Great, the first Christian

Emperor, with his mother Saint Helena, robed and crowned and haloed like a holy emperor and empress. Every church, however humble, enclosed a piece of heaven. Every church was a microcosm of the Great Church of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople.

It is easy to see how the idea grew that the establishment of the kingdom or nation of the Hellenes was only a beginning. When, in February 1821, Alexander Hypsilantis called on the Greeks to rise up and shed the blood of the tyrant Turks, he reminded them of the brave deeds of such as Epaminondas, Miltiades, Themistocles and Leonidas.²⁸ Hypsilantis made his famous proclamation not in Thebes or in Athens, but in Roumania. He was a Phanariote Greek who had been prince across the Danube. He had also served in the cavalry of the Russian Tsar. He liked to roll out the names of ancient Greek warriors and heroes. Most of his audience had little idea of what he was talking about, but they loved the rhetoric of it all. Hypsilantis sincerely wanted to turn the Turks out of Greece. But that was only the first step. For him, as for so many others at the time, the ultimate goal was Constantinople. His proclamation begins with the stirring words: "Fight for Faith and Fatherland!" But where, for Greek-speakers of the Orthodox faith, was the Fatherland? This question has bedevilled the entire history of the post-Byzantine world.

Koraes would probably have agreed that the true line of continuity between Homer and King Otto, or between Mycenaean, Hellenes, Byzantines and modern Greeks, is that of the Greek language. This is the current that has never been cut off, in spite of numerous historical interruptions. Greek has persisted longer than any other language except for Chinese. The problem in post-Byzantine, or even post-classical, history has been where to locate the center of its supply. Was it Athens or Constantinople or Bucharest or Jassy or Odessa or Alexandria or Smyrna or Ayvalik? The Greek-speaking and Byzantine-thinking world was so scattered. The Ottoman

Empire after all covered almost exactly the same geographical area as the Byzantine Empire; and its Greek-speaking Christian inhabitants had been designated from the start as the "Greek Nation," the *millet-i Rum*, of Orthodox Christians. But what would be the limits of that nation, and what would be its center, once it became independent?

For many years after the war that secured the independence of Greece, the fatherland, the *patris* of the Greek-speaking people was held to be Constantinople. Their identity as Hellenes was not enough. Hellenism was only one of their roots. They were also Romaioi, or Byzantines. That part of their identity required the possession of Constantinople as well as Athens. Their Byzantine tradition was indeed closer and more alive than that of ancient Greece. The continuity of the Greek cultural heritage, as of the living Orthodox heritage, must therefore, be proved and achieved through the realization of a Great Idea—the *Megale Idea*—the recreation of the Byzantine Empire as a Hellenic institution. The Idea was clearly expressed by Ioannes Kolettis when addressing the Constituent Assembly in Athens in 1844: "The Kingdom of Greece is not Greece. [Greece] constitutes only one part, the smallest and poorest part. A Greek is not only a man who lives within this kingdom. He is also one who lives in Ioannina, in Thessalonike, in Serres, in Adrianople, in Smyrna, in Trebizond, in Crete, in Samos and in any land associated with Greek history or the Greek race... There are two main centers of Hellenism: Athens, the capital of the Greek kingdom, [and] 'the City' [Constantinople], the dream and hope of all Greeks."²⁹

The Great Idea, the dream of fulfilling that hope by taking over Byzantium, fuddled the wits of Greek statesmen and politicians for about a hundred years after 1821. The bubble was finally pricked by the disaster of the Greek military adventure in Asia Minor in 1922. Greece today has accepted the smaller and less dangerous idea of being a

western European nation in a community of like-minded nations. In making this adjustment it has in many ways outgrown both of its burdensome traditions, the Hellenic and the Byzantine, the ancient and the medieval. The Hellenes of antiquity never succeeded in living together in harmony as one people, until unity was imposed upon them first by the Macedonians and then by the Romans. The Byzantines of the Middle Ages always thought in terms of a universal empire in which there was no place for separatism. They would have found the modern concept of nationhood undesirable and unintelligible. Ever since Lord Byron, and indeed long before, the western world has had impossibly high expectations that the Greeks would one day live up to the promise of their classical heritage. Ever since Edward Gibbon, the western world has misunderstood or despised the Byzantine heritage of the Greeks as a deadening influence. Koraes taught the Greeks themselves to feel the same. But surely both he and Gibbon were wrong. The legacy of Byzantium is no less important than that of ancient Hellas in defining the modern Greeks as Europeans. For it links them to a culture and a religion which they imparted to and shared with most of the non-Hellenic people of Eastern Europe in the Middle Ages.

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